



SHARP FACTS

Human Papillomavirus (HPV)



What is Human papillomavirus (HPV)?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the name of a group of viruses that infect the skin. There are more than 70 different types of HPV. Certain types of HPV cause warts on the hands or feet, and other types can cause warts on the genitals. Approximately 5.5 million new cases of sexually transmitted HPV (one third of all new STDs) occur in the U.S. each year, with at least 20 million people currently infected. Three out of four Americans between the ages of 15 and 49 have been infected with genital HPV in their lifetimes.

How do you get HPV or genital warts?

HPV and genital warts are usually spread by direct, skin-to-skin contact during vaginal, anal or (rarely) oral sex with someone who has this infection. Warts on other parts of the body, such as the hands, are caused by different types of HPV. People do not get genital warts by touching warts on their hands or feet. Genital warts are growths or bumps that appear on the vulva, in or around the vagina or anus, on the cervix, or on the penis, scrotum, or groin. They may be raised or flat, single or multiple, small or large. Warts may appear within several weeks after sex with a person who has HPV; or they may take months or years to appear; or they may never appear. This makes it hard to know exactly when you got the virus or from whom you got it.

Who gets HPV or genital warts?

HPV infection, including genital warts, can infect sexually active men and women of all ages, races, social classes, and sexual orientation. Infants can be infected by their mothers during birth, but this is very rare. HPV is so common that most sexually active people are exposed to it sometime during their life.

How can you avoid getting HPV or genital warts?

Ways that lower your risk of getting other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) may also work to lower your risk of getting HPV or genital warts:

- You can reduce your risk of getting HPV or genital warts by not having sex with anyone or by having sex only with one uninfected partner who has sex only with you. People who have many sex partners are at higher risk of getting HPV and other STDs.
- Evidence of the effectiveness of latex condoms in preventing HPV transmission is lacking. Latex condoms, used the correctly and consistently, may reduce the risk of getting an HPV infection if the condom covers the area of the skin with the HPV infection. Because it takes about three to eight months for warts to show up after a person comes in contact with HPV, a new partner may still be at risk of developing genital warts from a previous relationship months into the new relationship. Using condoms for at least eight months is a good idea.
- Spermicidal foams, creams and jellies are not proven to act against HPV and genital warts, but they work against some other STDs. They are best used along with condoms, not in place of condoms.

How are genital warts diagnosed?

You can check yourself and your partner(s) for warts, but remember: warts sometimes can be very hard to see. Also, sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between a wart and normal bumps or pimples. If you think you have warts or have been exposed to HPV, go to a doctor or clinic. A doctor or nurse will check you more closely.

What's the difference between a Pap smear and an HPV test?

A Pap smear is a test made to find abnormal cell changes in the cervix before they turn into cancer (precancerous changes). Precancerous cervical changes are caused by HPV. Women with abnormal Pap smears should be examined further for cervical problems (usually through a colposcope) or followed closely by a doctor or nurse.

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How are genital warts treated?

There are several treatments for genital warts. The goal of any treatment should be to remove visible genital warts to get rid of annoying symptoms. No one treatment is best for all cases. There are many ways to treat genital warts. The guidelines of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) include the following:

- Podofilox liquid or gel is a self-applied treatment for external genital warts. It doesn't cost much, is easy to use and safe.
- Imiquimod cream (Aldara®) is a self-applied treatment for external genital warts, including warts near the anus. It is safe, effective and easy to use. The cream is not harsh on the skin and does not cause scarring like some other treatments.
- Cryotherapy (freezing off the wart with liquid nitrogen) is relatively inexpensive, and is done by a trained doctor or nurse.
- Podophyllin is a chemical compound that must be applied by a doctor or nurse.
- Trichloroacetic acid (TCA) is another chemical applied to the surface of the wart by a doctor or a nurse.
- Laser therapy (using an intense light to destroy warts) or surgery (cutting off warts) has the advantage of getting rid of warts in a single office visit. However, treatment can cost a lot. Most doctors do not have lasers in their office and the doctor must be well-trained in these methods.
- The drug interferon is sometimes used, but less expensive therapies work just as well with fewer side effects.

IMPORTANT: Podofilox, Imiquimod, and TCA are sold by prescription only. Over-the-counter wart treatments should not be used in the genital area. When choosing what treatment to use your doctor or nurse will consider the size, location and number of warts, changes in the warts, patient preference, cost of treatment, convenience, adverse effects, and their own experience with the treatments.

Can HPV and genital warts be cured?

Treating genital warts can be frustrating for the patient and for the doctor or nurse. The average patient may take a few treatments to clear genital warts, and for some, it may take many treatments. None of the treatments listed above is a cure for HPV. The virus can remain in nearby skin even after treatment. Because the virus can lie dormant in cells, warts can return months after treatment. Sometimes warts may come back years after they've cleared, but that doesn't happen very often. Also, when warts return, it is hard to know if the warts are a return of the old warts or a new case. However, once clear for several months, most people with genital warts never have any come back.

What about HPV, genital warts and cancer?

The types of HPV linked to cervical cancer usually are not the types that cause genital warts. But if you have genital warts, you may also have come in contact with the types of HPV that are linked to cervical cancer. Like any other sexually active woman, a woman with genital warts should get yearly Pap smears. Having a Pap smear every year is the best way to keep from getting cervical cancer. Pap smears find abnormal cells that are on the surface of the cervix that may eventually become cancer if not treated. Cancer almost always can be stopped before it occurs by finding and treating abnormal cells early.

Where can I get more information?

Your medical care provider should be consulted if you think you may have been exposed to any sexually transmitted disease. The American Social Health Organization (ASHA) (<http://www.ashastd.org/>) operates a National HPV Hotline at (877) HPV-5868. CDC provides information through their National STD Hotline at (800) 227-8922. For further information regarding your sexual health, visit the Sexual Health and Responsibility Program Home Page at <http://www.nehc.med.navy.mil/hp/sharp>.

This information was adapted by the Sexual Health and Responsibility Program (SHARP), Directorate of Health Promotion and Population Health, Navy Environmental Health Center in Norfolk, Virginia from material developed by the American Social Health Organization (ASHA).